

**DO NOT** 1  
**DATE** 3/20/09  
**SB** 394

## Vote By Mail - An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Measure 60- Vote By Mail came about because 11,000 Oregonians from all walks of life: Republicans, Democrats and Independents, college students and senior citizens, community leaders and housewives stepped forward and volunteered their time. Vote By Mail was able to submit over 100,000 signatures collected **entirely by citizen volunteers** - the only all-volunteer measure to qualify.

Vote By Mail transcends the typical partisan battles seen so often in our initiative process because it is an idea that makes sense: it increases voter participation, saves money and makes democracy more convenient for everyone. The following is a short list of individuals, companies and organizations that have endorsed Measure 60 (Due to space requirements we apologize for not listing everybody).

### Organizations

League of Women Voters

Oregon League of Conservation Voters

AARP of Oregon

American Association of University Women

Oregon Common Cause

AFL-CIO Oregon

OSPIRG

NW Oregon Labor Council

Oregon Education Association

Special Districts Association of Oregon



*Yellowstone County*

**ELECTION ADMINISTRATOR**

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Honorable Representatives, House State Administration Committee:

Today you will be hearing SB 394. This bill leaves the decision of whether or not a mail ballot election will be conducted, at a **local level**. This bill allows the people who are directly accountable to the voters the option of choosing which type of voting is best for their constituents based upon the factors of administrative feasibility, economic viability and the highest level of accessibility. In Yellowstone County all of our elections, except for the federal elections, have been conducted by mail ballot for years. In the next 14 months we will issue nearly a quarter of a million ballots by mail. In each of these mail ballot elections, there are always at least 5 accessible "drop-off" locations where voters can deposit their ballots and where the AutoMarks (voting machines for the voter with a disability) are available.

One major point is that we have been conducting mail ballot elections since 1985. This is **NOT** a major shift in our voting or jumping into anything without first testing the waters. The only change that this bill makes is providing the **option** of conducting federal elections in the same manner as all of our other elections are conducted. We elect our school trustees, our council members and our judges with mail ballot elections. We conduct elections by mail which decide how we educate our children, how many police are on the streets, how our most vulnerable citizens are cared for as well as how our tax dollars are spent in the schools, the cities and our fire, water and all other special districts. Across the state, hundreds of elections have been conducted by mail ballot and hundred's of millions of dollars have been approved or disapproved in elections conducted by mail ballot. We already conduct mail ballot elections in both urban and rural areas that are fair, efficient, accessible and fiscally responsible. Many of these elections are conducted yearly on reservations and the turnout is much higher than if the elections were held at the polling place.

The opponents to the idea of voting by mail cannot come up with actual problems; they can only bring up vague concerns and shadowy fears. The

past 24 years have provided the facts and have disproved these fears; the facts have verified the validity of our vote by mail process.

#### Advantages of Vote by Mail:

- **No waiting in line** - In Yellowstone County the increasing costs and complexities of elections are forcing us to consider drastic consolidation, which will mean many fewer polling places and reduce accessibility for the voters. Without mail ballot elections, we have no choice in these tough economic times and as more and more complexity is added to the election process. Mail ballot elections will likely have more "drop-off" sites than we will have with consolidation.
- **No polling place intimidation** - In virtually every federal election we are forced to dispatch law enforcement to maintain order at the polls.
- **No confusion about where to go to vote** - With consolidation and redistricting, polling places often change and voters are often confused by these changes.
- **No need to make arrangements for childcare or time off from work** - this is a benefit to single mothers and lower income workers.
- **No need to hire and train poll workers** - Yellowstone County recruits and trains over 750 election judges and this is becoming more and more difficult and more and more costly.
- **Increased election process integrity through signature verification** - Signatures are NEVER verified in polling place elections while EVERY signature is verified in a mail ballot election before it can be accepted.
- **Lower election administration costs** - If Mail Ballot elections had been held in 2008, we could have saved between 3 and 4 million dollars of taxpayer money in Montana.
- **Increased voter turnout, even in Federal elections** - Every year since 1998 Montana has ranked behind both Oregon and Washington state since they moved to mail ballot elections. Prior to their movement to mail ballot elections, Montana consistently had a higher voter turnout. This is particularly significant because of the large urban areas of Seattle and Portland. Traditionally, large urban areas are notoriously low in voter turnout.
- **Time for voter to make well-informed decisions and ask questions if not sure** - in polling place elections, voters are "rushed" into voting for candidates or issues of which they may be ill-informed. With mail ballot elections they have the time and opportunity to make well-informed decisions or ask questions of candidates before casting their ballot.

Montana's mail ballot law is modeled after the Oregon model. One important thing to understand though is that Montana's Mail Ballot laws are far superior to Oregon's or Washington's because of our late registration provision. In

Oregon and Washington if you miss the voter registration deadline, you are out of luck in regards to voting. Montana has the safety net of late registration so that a voter, who would not be able to vote in Oregon or Washington, is allowed to vote in Montana.

A few interesting items from the Oregon study are listed below and I think they provide data that disprove many of the assertions of the opponents to mail ballot elections and point to the fact that mail ballot elections will serve Montana voters extremely well:

- Overall Oregonians prefer voting by mail over voting at the polling place 80.9% to 19.1% -
- Females prefer voting by mail 83% to 77.5% for males -
- The three categories of Employment status who most favor voting by mail are homemakers (93.3%), Disabled (89.3%) and Retired (85.5%)
- The two age groups who most favor voting by mail are 18 - 25 year olds (86.7%) and 65+ years old (86%) - the youngest and the oldest age groups
- The difference between whites and non-whites is very small (81.5% to 79.3%)
- Rural voters favor mail ballot more than urban (81.3% to 80.2%)
- The three categories of income that most favor voting by mail are the three lowest income categories; Less than \$18,00 (81.1%), \$18,000 - \$25,000 (84.4%), \$26,000 - \$40,000 (83.7%)

<http://www.votebymailproject.org/Southwell.pdf>

<http://secstate.wa.gov/documentvault/WashingtonStatesVotebyMailExperienceOctober2007-2066.pdf>

I hope you can see fit to support SB 394 and allow Montana elections to continue to be conducted with integrity, efficiency and fiscal responsibility. Please contact me if you have any questions or if I can be of any assistance. Thank you.

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Yellowstone County